

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 2

“Give the king Your justice, O God, and Your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor...

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.”
(Psalm 72:1-4, 11-14, NRSV)

As I mentioned in the last article, the Bible covers more than 2,000 years of politics. We can break it down roughly to 7 periods:

- 1. In the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were nomadic wanderers who owned very little land and had control only over their households.
- 2. In the time after, they were slaves for generations in Egypt, where they had no political influence at all.
- 3. After conquering the promised land, they were a confederacy of 12 tribes, and their leaders were those whose lives exhibited the hand of God at work.
- 4. Then they chose Kings (from about 1020-586 BC) and ruled as a nation among other nations. Occasionally they were the dominant nation, but most of the time they were equal or less powerful than others. For the people, the King could either be just or he could be a cruel dictator. Likewise, local leaders could oppress their own people if they chose.
- 5. With the fall of the Kingdoms of Israel (721 BC) and Judah (586 BC), the people were a sort of slave nation, living in the land but under the control of Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks (from about 586-160 BC). There were Israelites who had authority by collaborating with the ruling nation, but they would have been seen as traitors to their people.
- 6. There was about a hundred-year span (from about 160-63 BC) where the Jews gained independence and exercised their own power over their people, sometimes oppressively.
- 7. But then Rome took over (63 BC), and during the entire time of the New Testament, the people again lived as second-class citizens with no political power at all.

One thing, however, that is consistent through the periods 3-7, where they had some level of control of their society (at least on the local level), the expectation (see Psalm 72 above) is that leaders are to serve the people, especially the ones most in need. If we were to imagine a society with no rules or government, it would likely be a culture where the those with the most wealth and power would control everything and have their way. They would take what they wanted and they would win every dispute with money or force. Then comes governments and laws, but if these are crafted by the powerful, they only continue the exploitation of the weak. but Israel came onto the scene with a different kind of rule, laws that honored their God but also treated people with respect (the ten commandments are both laws about how we treat God and how we treat others). In this rule, the powerful do not always win the disputes, and no one is allowed to simply take what they want.

But the allure of power is strong; even though Israel was to be a people who worshiped the one true God and cared for their neighbors, the other nations seemed as strong or stronger, and their leaders lived

in luxury. The temptation was always for Israel to be “like the other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5, 20). Usually this means exploring the gods of other nations (after all, they seem to be blessed):

“When King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. King Ahaz sent to the priest Uriah a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details. The priest Uriah built the altar; in accordance with all that King Ahaz had sent from Damascus, just so did the priest Uriah build it, before King Ahaz arrived from Damascus.” (2 Kings 16:10-11, NRSV)

It also mentions earlier that this King Ahaz (King from around 736-714 BC) sacrificed one of his sons (2 Kings 16:3), which could have been related to the very altar mentioned above, or to one of the other gods. Political alliances with the other nations came with a high cost. No wonder most of the Kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 15:3, 26, 34; 16:25, 30; 2 Kings 3:2; 8:18, 27; 10:31; 13:2, 11; 14:24, 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 16:2; 17:2; 21:2, 20; 23:32, 37; 24:19) were judged evil and leading Israel into sin. But this was not just about worshipping other gods; other nations were also models in how to exploit their people. This was never meant to be true for Israel. Consider this indictment of King Jehoiakim, the son of the just King Josiah:

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,’ and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.

*Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. **Is not this to know Me?** says the LORD.*

But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.” (Jeremiah 22:13-17, NRSV)

So this is the situation of Israel for most of the period 4 (from about 1020-586 BC). Most of the Bible was written in its current form after these events, when the people were no longer in control of their own nation, and they reflected on how God had blessed them, but they messed it up. The prophet Ezekiel notes that Jerusalem deserved the punishment she received, and even worse:

“As I live, says the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before Me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.”

(Ezekiel 16:48-50, NRSV)

One would think that the nation would learn from its past, but in the next part I will point to how even as a slave people (periods 5-7), leaders did not serve their people, and this is a key to the message of Jesus.

Yours in Christ,

